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Decolonizing Central Europe: Czech Art and the Question of ‘Colonial Innocence’

Matthew Rampley 

The recent call to decolonize art history and the institutions of art have largely focused on the legacies of the major European and American colonial powers, such as Britain, France, Spain and the United States. Positioning Europe at the heart of modernity/coloniality prompts questions to do with how to place the states and cultures of east central Europe, none of which had colonial territories or engaged in projects of expropriation and colonial exploitation. It was long assumed that states such as Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic were little touched by the debate over decolonization, precisely because they had no overseas colonial empires. Belief in ‘colonial innocence’ was an important aspect of national self-definition. This article examines this conviction with reference to the specific case of the Czech lands and Czechoslovakia. Looking at practices of cultural representation, museum collecting and architecture in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it suggests that the idea of colonial innocence is open to interrogation.

Keywords: Decolonization; Czechoslovakia; Austria-Hungary; Bosnia; Orientalism; Imperialism; Art collecting; Museums; Post-colonialism; Central Europe

Introduction

In 2020 an extended questionnaire was published in *Art History* on the topic of ‘Decolonizing Art History’.¹ With responses from some 30 critics, academic art historians and curators, the questionnaire posed the following basic questions:

- What is the historical specificity of current calls to decolonize art history? How are they different from previous challenges to the discipline?
- What is your understanding of decolonizing art history now? What does a decolonized art history look like? How should it be written/practised?
- How might the decolonization of art history impact upon your own area of research/practice? What would be produced from it? Might anything have to be jettisoned?
- Where should decolonization in relation to art history happen? What strategies might different spaces for decolonization demand?

Space does not allow for a detailed description of all individual replies; indeed, it is not necessary, for although there were differences of emphasis, certain views were shared by many if not most of the respondents. They included: (1) an emphasis on the

intertwining of European and American art and art institutions with colonial rule; (2) the argument that art historical discourse is itself a product of European colonialism; (3) acknowledgement that its basic categories, discourses and values require dismantling as part of what Mignolo has termed ‘epistemic disobedience’; (4) and creating a space for the voice of the colonized to be heard.² Decolonizing art history consequently demands more than merely expanding the geographical range of teaching and research in art history. It also demands rethinking how the discipline is even conceived, including the notion of art ‘history’, which, it has been argued, privileged a model of time and European civilization that was central to the project of colonial legitimation.³

The call to decolonize has been largely aimed at the established imperial regimes: British, French, American, Spanish, Portuguese, Belgian, German, Russian, Italian and Japanese. A discourse has also emerged on the developing economic imperialism on the part of the European Union, although this has yet to have had much impact on analysis of the visual arts.⁴ However, what is the pertinence of the debate over decoloniality when it comes to a region that has been central to the project of European modernity, but which has seldom been seen as an *agent* of colonialism? I am referring to the states of east central Europe, which have, if anything, been characterized in terms of their subaltern status in regard to the dominant powers of Russia, Germany and Austria.

I pose this question because many have claimed that east central Europe comprises an exception. No states of the region had overseas colonial empires comparable to those of the western European powers; indeed, much of the debate over the geopolitical role of central Europe has emphasized its location on the political and cultural margins. It is consequently assumed that the project of decoloniality is of only tangential significance to east central Europe.

This article argues, however, that it is not so easily disentangled from the wider history of European colonialism and that the call to decolonize is just as pertinent for east central Europe as it is for the old imperial centres of power further west, albeit in different ways. In order to amplify this in more detail, the remainder of this article focuses on Bohemia, Moravia and Moravian Silesia – traditionally, but erroneously referred to as the ‘Czech lands’ – and, from 1918 onwards, Czechoslovakia. The issues discussed here, however, are equally applicable to analysis of neighbouring states and cultures. The article is therefore treating Czech and Czechoslovak culture as the preliminary to a much broader inquiry.

A Manifesto of Decolonization

Where east central Europe has been discussed in the context of colonialism, it has often been as the colonized rather than as a putative ‘colonizer’. Larry Wolff, for example, examined the emergence of the concept of ‘Eastern Europe’ in the Enlightenment imagination of western Europe as populated by exotic, half-oriental, backward others.⁵ For many in the salons of Paris and London, Eastern Europe was the home of:

the Hungarian, striding stiffly, with his fur-lined dolman, his close-fitting trousers reaching almost to his ankles, and his long pigtail; or the round-headed Pole with his monkish haircut and flowing sleeves: both nations die in their boots – Armenians, Wallachians and Moldavians, with their half-Oriental costumes, are not uncommon – The Serbians with their twisted moustaches . . . The Polish Jews, all swathed in black, their faces bearded and their hair all twisted in knots, resemble scarecrows: a living satire of the Chosen Race – Bohemian peasants with their long boots; Hungarian and Transylvanian waggoners with sheepskin greatcoats.⁶

The affinities between the image of the Slavs of south-eastern Europe and that of the Islamic world prompted Maria Todorova to coin the term ‘Balkanism’ as a counterpart to Edward Said’s notion of ‘orientalism,’ while the proliferation of popular adventure novels set in central and eastern Europe has led to the idea of the ‘Ruritanian romance’ after the fictional location of Anthony Hope’s 1894 novel *The Prisoner of Zenda*.⁷

Likewise, the *Habsburg postcolonial* project undertaken by a group of Austrian researchers suggested that it was appropriate to approach the cultural and political dynamics of Austria-Hungary in terms of colonial relations. The Habsburg administration’s policy of ‘inner colonisation’, as they put it, its attitude towards those subject peoples who were not Italians, German-Austrians or Hungarians, could be compared to the imperial rule of France or Britain, predicated on a clear hierarchy of peoples and cultures.⁸ Clemens von Metternich’s assertion that ‘Asia begins at the Landstrasse’ may have been apocryphal – the attribution of this, his most famous statement, may have been based merely on hearsay – but it expressed an attitude that was widely held by Austrians.⁹ The popular Austrian author Karl Franzos (1848–1904) titled his book of travel reports in Galicia and Bukovina *Half Asia*, while Habsburg rule over Bosnia was explicitly understood to be a civilizing mission.¹⁰

Discussion of asymmetrical and hierarchial relations has been similarly influential in art history. One of the most prominent voices in this context, Piotr Piotrowski, described in compelling terms the inequalities besetting the relation between the modernisms of the canonical artistic centres of Paris, Berlin and New York and those of central Europe, and how that relation has been understood. For the latter were almost invariably interpreted as latecomers or derivative camp-followers. In order to overcome this hierarchy he advocated adoption of ‘horizontal art history’, a process he described using what has long been a staple of post-colonial criticism: Hegel’s master–slave dialectic.¹¹ This involves not merely restoring artistic agency to the art centres of east central Europe, but also overturning the power relations that have given symbolic dominance and a near-monopoly of cultural capital to North America, western Europe and, to some degree, Russia and the former Soviet Union.

Against this background, two short articles published in Czech in 2020 ran very much against the grain. The first was a brief reflection by the political scientist Pavel Barša on the failures of the members of the Visegrád-4 group of countries (Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia) to respond to the Syrian

humanitarian crisis of 2015.¹² The states in question refused to comply with the refugee quota agreement the European Commission attempted to broker and, more generally, displayed little sympathy with the plight of Syrians fleeing the civil war there. How might we understand this, given that the collapse of Communist rule had been accompanied by a rhetoric of universal human rights and solidarity?

The reason, Barša argued, was the continuing legacy of official Communist attitudes towards the Third World (the dominant term at the time) and its pursuit of solidarity in the name of anti-capitalist and anti-colonial struggle. Scepticism towards the government and its manipulative propaganda meant that many Czechs, amongst others, had little sympathy with anti-racial struggles. As Barša noted:

The more or less compulsory collections for ‘solidarity funds’ aimed at supporting the peoples of the Third World, which the Communist regime implemented in Czech workplaces, high schools, and universities, discredited both pan-human solidarity and anti-colonialism. As part of its propagandistic self-legitimation, the regime forced upon us a key to understanding the world: the evil, racist West against the virtuous, oppressed South.¹³

Cynicism towards this rhetoric meant that many Czechs were driven all the more to identify with the capitalist West; Milan Kundera’s famous essay in 1984 on the ‘tragedy’ of central Europe exemplifies this outlook, since his thesis that the nations of central Europe had somehow been kidnapped from their historic place at the heart of western culture was the antithesis of the idea of global anti-colonial struggle and, Barša suggested, explained the dynamics of Czech culture since 1989.¹⁴

For a sense of ‘rejoining’ Europe was central to the ideology of the Velvet Revolution of 1989 and revealed the cultural pathology at play, Barša noted, since the primary concern was to ensure that the place of Czechs and Slovaks as ‘European’ remained unthreatened. For many it was important, he argued, to draw a clear boundary between Czechoslovakia and other states deemed on the periphery of Europe or even not European at all. The Syrians reminded them of what they had most feared becoming. In this light it was important, he suggested, to challenge the traditional self-definition of Czechs as one of the ‘small’ nations.¹⁵ For Czechs had to confront the uncomfortable fact that even if their embrace of a Eurocentric view of themselves was not explicitly founded on notions of white supremacy, it nevertheless bore troubling similarities, evident in the racism that members of many minorities, in particular Muslims, faced on a daily basis.

Shortly after, Barša and colleagues and students at Charles University published a *Manifesto of Decolonization*, which made even broader claims. It stated:

The Czech lands are historically connected with the rest of the world. Central Europe is not outside the complicated relationship of the West and its former colonies, outside of world history. In addition, many Czech travelers, missionaries, businessmen, and soldiers were directly involved in building and maintaining the colonial system.

Further, he added:

It is not just about the economy, but also about cultural ideas. Narratives of “overseas discoveries” or the exoticization of blackness served the Czechs as a confirmation of their place as part of the West, and as a result they agreed with the colonial system. The colonial imagination, which builds on the maturity of the West and the backwardness of the global South, is present in fairy tales, travel films, adventure novels, museums of various specializations and school syllabuses.¹⁶

It was a bold assertion, but after some initial interest in the press and media, it was quickly forgotten and little seems to have shifted. Some, such as the Prague-based art historian Milena Bartlová, were sympathetic to Barša’s position, but expressed pessimism about its prospects, due to the depth of change it would require of established value hierarchies and narratives of Czech culture and society.¹⁷ Interrogation of the colonial past was either politely ignored or even resisted because it brought into question fundamental tropes of Czech national identity. For ever since František Palacký (1798–1876) published the founding history of Bohemia and Moravia in 1836, the dominant myth of Czech identity was as a nation oppressed by German and then Habsburg rule, especially after the Battle of the White Mountain of 1621, which saw the defeat of the last attempt by the Bohemian aristocracy to challenge imperial rule.¹⁸ This notion has been repeated over and over again; the Czechs were, it is commonly held, the ‘little’ nation, the victims of Habsburg and Austrian-German domination, it has been contended, innocent of the colonial ambitions of their larger neighbours. Indeed, Palacký’s myth of Czech national history, which has exercised such a powerful hold on the historical imagination even in the present, has arguably served to mask the deeper entanglements of Czechs in European colonialism.

The *Manifesto of Decolonization* focused on recent events, tracing their roots back to widespread cynicism towards official Communist policy and rhetoric regarding anti-colonial solidarity with the global south. However, the origins of the attitudes and practices in question go further back, to Austria Hungary and to the imperialist mindset that sustained it. For although the years of Habsburg rule led to the hegemony of Austrian-German culture, many Czech speakers were also enablers and agents of imperial rule and of its global aspirations. Consequently, too, while Czech nationalists, in particular, resented their subordinate status within the Empire, the identification of Czechs as (implicitly white) ‘European’ meant that when it came to attitudes to and interactions with peoples outside of Europe, in Africa, Asia and Australasia, for example, they differed little from their contemporaries in neighbouring countries such as Germany, France or Belgium.

In examining the relevance of the call to decolonize to the understanding of Czech art, architecture and visual culture, the focus of the remainder of this article is on the period of the late Habsburg Empire and the First Czechoslovak Republic, which was set up after its demise. It discusses examples that illustrate two specific themes in more detail: (1) exoticism, architecture, art and discursive representations during in Habsburg

Empire; and (2) art collecting by individual Czech travellers and by museums and galleries now in the Czech Republic. Its aim is to open up a space for wider critical examination of the place of Czech culture and society in the European colonial project.

A Bohemian Empire and Bohemian Exoticisms

There never was a Bohemian, Moravian or Czech colonial empire. Nor, indeed, did Austria-Hungary have an empire comparable to those of France or Britain. Its only formal colony was Bosnia-Herzegovina, annexed from the Ottoman Empire in 1878, and it can hardly be accused of the same kind of exploitation of overseas resources, people and artefacts that characterized the empires of the major European powers. Traditionally, historians have tended to emphasize the *difference* in this regard between Austria-Hungary and its European neighbours. Hence, even if we accept that the Habsburg (and Hungarian) administrations treated their Slavic and Romanian minorities in a high-handed manner, there was still a distinction between Austria-Hungary and France or Britain. Romanians, Slavs and other groups may have complained about the cultural and political hegemony of Austrian Germans and the Hungarians, but this imbalance was not remotely comparable to the situation of most colonial subjects of France or Britain. Indeed, Poles and Czechs were often involved in imperial government. One may contrast this with the legal and social gulf that separated African subjects, for example, from their colonial rulers, or indeed the treatment of aboriginal Australians by European settlers.¹⁹

It would consequently be misleading to view Austria-Hungary as just one more European colonial power; nevertheless, when it comes to overseas imperial ventures and the *aspiration* to rule over non-Europeans, this distinction has slowly come to be picked apart.²⁰ Even if the installation of Maximilian, brother of the Habsburg emperor Franz Josef, on the Mexican throne was driven by the ambitions of Napoleon III (and Conservative Mexicans) rather than Austrian scheming, there had been earlier attempts at establishing an overseas presence.²¹ In the late eighteenth century the Habsburg administration sought (unsuccessfully) to boost maritime trade and establish possessions in India and the Nicobar Islands in the Indian Ocean through the short-lived Imperial Asiatic Company of Trieste and Antwerp.²² A century later, Austria-Hungary was also active in the European suppression of China and of the so-called Boxer Rebellion at the end of the nineteenth century, gaining a foothold of territory there until it was expelled in 1917.²³ The Habsburgs placed no demands for territories at the Berlin Conference of 1884—1885 that decided the fate of Africa, but the state did gain trading concessions and unimpeded access to nearly all European ports in the continent.²⁴ Austria-Hungary was thus still a participant and beneficiary of the colonial system. As Walter Sauer has stated:

If, in a rather simplistic manner, only “formal empire” (direct state control) is considered, then the significance of the Habsburg monarchy is indeed minimal. European overseas expansion, however, was a more complex phenomenon. Over the centuries, it played itself out in different intensities, developed both formal and informal empires and varied considerably

between different European countries depending on a range of underlying interests, available resources and political timetables.

If we adopt a broader understanding of European dominance, in which both formal and informal strategies (like hegemonial relations in trade or ideology) are included, and in which political, economic and cultural phenomena are addressed, the resulting picture of Austria-Hungary becomes more complex.²⁵

We can identify its colonial imprint in terms of the role of enterprises such as trade missions, scientific and scholarly expeditions and missionary activity. Indeed, this list can be expanded by the inclusion of individual travellers and explorers. Aside from those whose activities gained semi-official support from the central government, others whose initiatives were merely an outcome of civil society were equally beneficiaries of the fact that, as subjects of one of the great European land powers, they enjoyed a hegemonic position wherever they travelled. As such, many Habsburg subjects harboured an outlook about their place in the world – as Christians/Jews and Europeans – that would not have been at odds with views held in nineteenth-century Paris, Brussels or London. Thus, expeditions such as the Habsburg-sponsored 1872–1874 voyage of the *Tegetthoff* to find the Northwest Passage were arguably driven by a similar ideology; the *Tegetthoff*'s claim to Franz Josef Land, for example, indicated that Austrians, too, were no exception to the 'soaring proprietorial ambition of the European imperial mind' of the nineteenth century.²⁶

Figures from Bohemia and Moravia played an important role in the administration of the Habsburg Empire as agents and members of an 'imperial service class' that saw itself as standing above ethnic and linguistic divisions.²⁷ As early as the eighteenth century, this class included prominent state actors such as Wenzel Anton Kaunitz, state chancellor from 1753 to 1792, Count Franz Anton Kolowrat-Liebsteinsky, head of the Austrian state council in the 1820s and 1830s, or Leopold Count of Thun and Hohenstein, responsible for significant reforms as minister for education in the 1850s, and a keen advocate of the Czech national revival.

It might of course be objected that this is of little relevance here, for these and other individuals did not identify themselves as 'Czech'. Instead, they were imperial subjects from Bohemia or Moravia; it was only in the late nineteenth century that 'German' and 'Czech' came to displace those earlier forms of identification.²⁸ This shift has often been used by Czechs to disavow a connection with that earlier Habsburg history; in this context Filip Herza has referred to the phenomenon of Czech 'colonial exceptionalism', which he defines as 'the relatively strong and persisting conviction that Czechoslovakia has been [*sic*] part of the project of Western modernity, while at the same time has been able to claim "colonial innocence"'.²⁹ Yet this distinction is not so easily drawn, for Czechs were not immune to the appeal of colonial fantasies. In 1919 the writer Jan Havlasa (1883–1964), author of novels set in 'exotic' locations such as Singapore (*Children of Disquiet*, 1918), Japan (*Windows into the Fog*, 1918; [Figure 1](#)) and Tahiti (*The Song of*

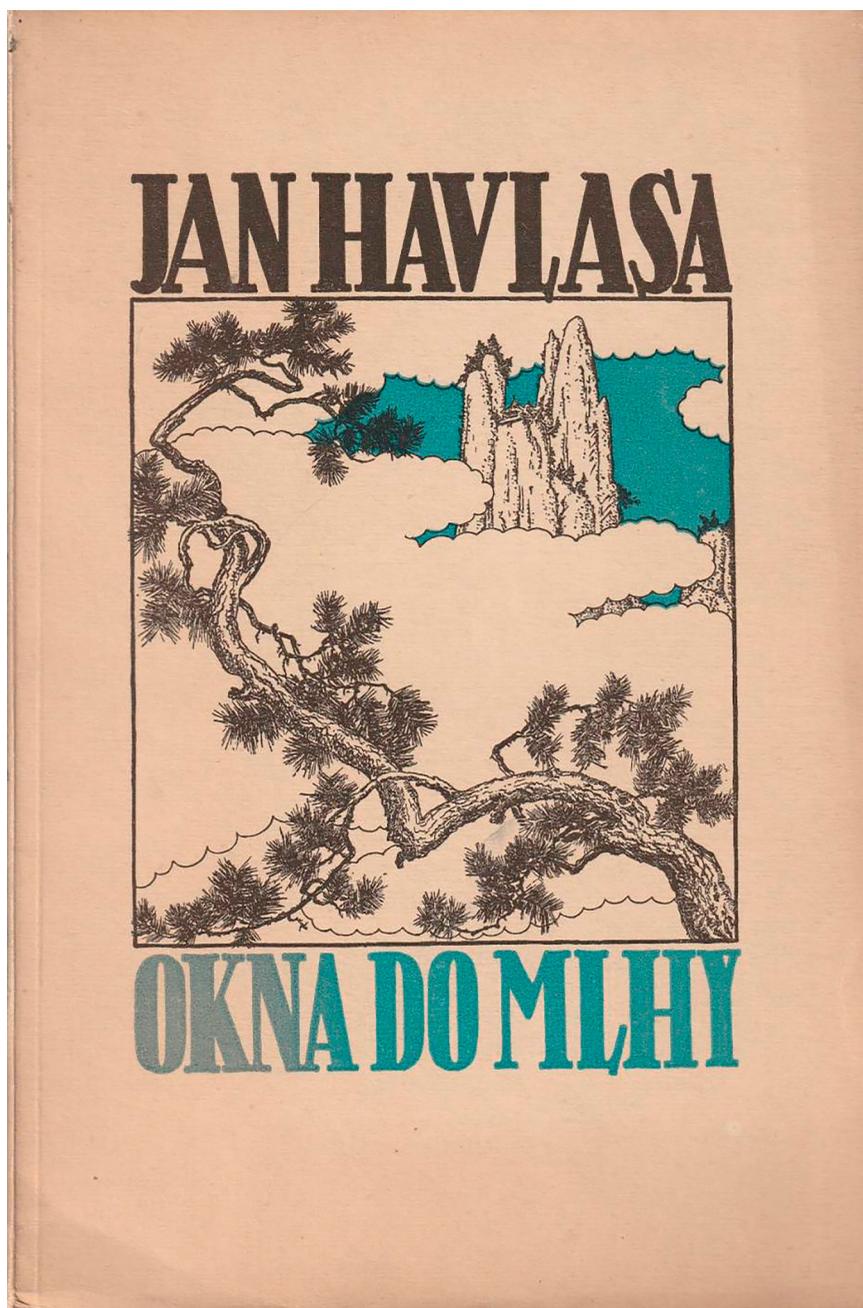


Figure 1. Otakar Štáfl, Front cover illustration to Jan Havlasa, *Windows into the Fog* (Prague, 1918).

the Coral Reefs, 1922), published a pamphlet arguing that the newly founded Czechoslovak Republic should take over administration of the former German colony of Togo.³⁰

Moreover, there are numerous figures who were unambiguously tied to the Habsburg Empire, yet who have also been claimed as central figures in Czech culture, too.

Perhaps the best-known example is Alois Musil (1868–1944), born to a farming family near the Moravian town of Vyškov. Trained as a theologian in Olmütz/Olomouc in Moravia, and then Jerusalem, he first came to public prominence on account of his archaeological expeditions in the Middle East. During extensive travels in Jordan in the 1890s, funded by the imperial library in Vienna, he discovered the early Islamic castle of Qusayr ‘Amra, famous for its figurative frescoes. He later published his findings in Vienna (Figures 2 and 3) with the support of the art historians Alois Riegl and Franz Wickhoff.³¹ By 1909 he had become a professor of Arabic and Biblical Studies at the University of Vienna and was a prominent figure in the Habsburg academic establishment. In his capacity as an ordained cleric, Musil also became close to the imperial family, eventually serving as the personal confessor to Emperor Karl and his wife Zita. During the First World War he was employed by the Habsburg state to use his extensive contacts in the Arabic Middle East to counter attempts by the British to foment Arab rebellion against Ottoman rule. After 1918, he became a Czechoslovak citizen; initially viewed with a certain amount of suspicion owing to his imperial connections, he was appointed professor at Charles University in Prague in 1920, and eventually became instrumental in founding the Oriental Institute there.³²

As a scholar of Islamic culture, and as an archaeological overseeing archaeological expeditions in the Jordanian desert, Musil arguably exemplified the figure of the European scholar of the ‘orient’ analysed, first, by Edward Said and then by later

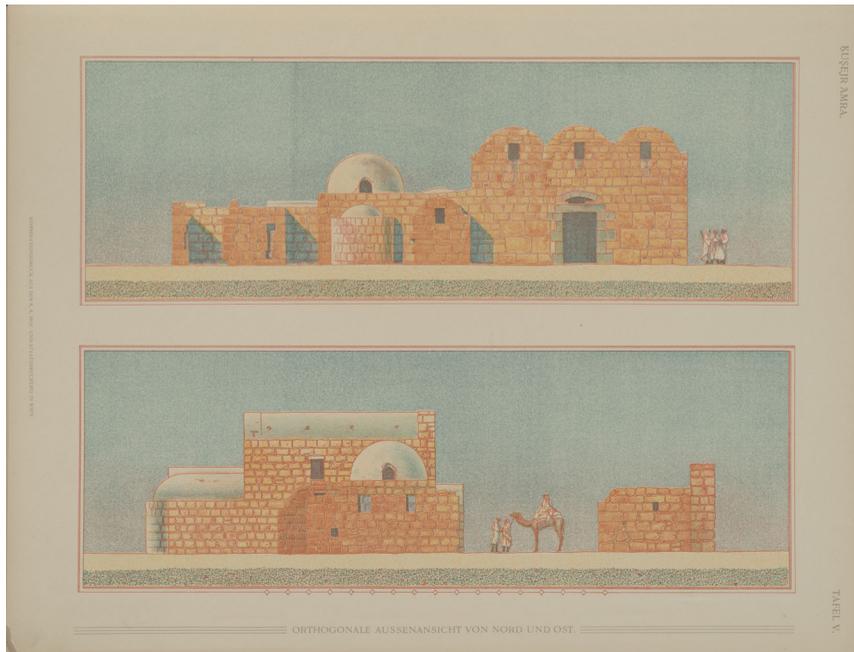


Figure 2. Alphons Mielich, Cross section of Qusayr ‘Amra (1901) from Alois Musil, *Kusejr Amra* (Vienna, 1907). Photo: New York Public Library.



Figure 3. Alphons Mielich, Frescoes of Qusayr ‘Amra (1901) from Alois Musil, *Kusejr Amra* (Vienna, 1907). Photo: New York Public Library.

authors.³³ This impression is strengthened by his willingness to further the Habsburg cause by treating the Levant and the Jordan as a stage on which great power politics were played out, where local cultures were cultivated merely as auxiliaries to larger imperial strategies. His move to Prague was a continuation rather than break with the past in this respect. In 1920 he published a pamphlet in Czech on ‘Our Tasks in Oriental Studies and in the Orient’, which provided an outline of the state of Czechoslovak scholarship on the Middle East, but in which the model was unambiguously that of France and Britain.³⁴ Later, in 1935, he published a lecture describing the ways in which Czechoslovakia could deploy relationships in the Middle East to further its own strategic priorities, with little consideration for the wishes or aspirations of the local populations.³⁵

Musil was also one of the founders of the journal *Archiv Orientální* (The Oriental Archive) of the Institute of Oriental Studies in Prague, which first appeared in 1929. With articles in German, French and English alone (it was not until 1946 that an issue included contributions in Czech), the journal was part of the mainstream of European academic research on the ancient Near East as well as contemporary Islamic culture and, as such, Musil himself was a prolific author; in the 1930s he wrote a series of books under the title ‘The Orient Today’ (*Dnešní orient*), on regions and countries across Africa and Asia, ranging from the Lebanon to Ethiopia, Libya and the Himalayas.³⁶ They were serious studies of the countries in question, but, with a focus on exotic local characteristics, such books are still vulnerable to the criticism that they adopt the typical exoticizing gaze of the western European observer. Alongside these works Musil also published popular accounts of his pre-war travels in English, German and Czech for younger readers.³⁷ These took the form of travelogues

and novels, telling tales of adventures in the Middle East, featuring romanticized depictions of Bedouin customs and culture, aided by drawings and illustrations that helped convey the sense of imaginative adventure.³⁸

Musil's involvement in imperial entanglements in the Islamic world, and his tendency to reiterate common tropes about Bedouin cultures, were not exceptional. Closer to home, Czechs were also notable agents in the apparatus of Habsburg colonial rule over Bosnia. This included serving as administrators, civil servants and members of the military; as Jitka Malečková has noted, in 1910 'Česká Beseda' (The Czech Forum), the Czech expatriate organization, listed some 2000 Czechs resident in Sarajevo, ranging from doctors to bankers, cooks, entrepreneurs and merchants.³⁹ Of greatest interest for the present discussion is their contribution as architects and engineers to the building of the physical infrastructure of Bosnia, which was seen as a key instrument of the modernizing aims of Habsburg rule. Karel Pařík (1857–1942), for example, born in Jičín, near Hradec Králové in eastern Bohemia, moved to Sarajevo in the early 1880s and went on to build some of the most important civic buildings in the city, such as the Europa Hotel (1882), the National Museum (1909–1913) (Figure 4), the Sharia School (1887) and the Ashkenazi Synagogue (1902).⁴⁰ Likewise, František Blážek (1863–1944), a native of Zálší in eastern Bohemia, designed the military garrison in Sarajevo (1898–1901), a number of hotels in the city and the gymnasium in Mostar (1902; Figure 5). For figures such as these, the sprawling Habsburg territories provided numerous opportunities for employment and professional advancement, yet by pursuing them, many members of the Czech-speaking



Figure 4. Karel Pařík, The Bosnian National Museum, Sarajevo (1909–1913). Photo: Julian Nyča.



Figure 5. František Blážek, The Mostar Gymnasium (1898–1902) after the restoration of 2009. Photo: Wolfgang Pehlemann.

professional middle-classes became implicated in the wider geopolitical ambitions of the Habsburg empire.

In many respects such imperial service should come as no surprise, for these figures were products of the Habsburg system of education and professional training. Pařík, for example, studied at the Academy of Fine Art in Vienna under Theophil Hansen and Friedrich von Schmidt. In other words, in the absence of any alternative system and structure of training, they were imbued with exactly the same values and outlook as their German-speaking peers. The numbers cited by the *Česká Beseda* indicate that, at the very least, Czechs tacitly accepted the Habsburg presence, pursuing the professional opportunities it provided.

Such examples bring into question the long-held assumption that Czechs were in some sense ‘innocent’ of involvement in the exercise of colonial power. Indeed, it should consequently come as no surprise that Czechs were prone to the same kind of exoticizing views of non-European cultures and peoples as their peers in France and Britain. As Hana Navratilová has stated: ‘Czechs were as capable of producing simplified or stereotyped observations ... as any other European ... we find an unmitigated feeling of European superiority, superiority dictated allegedly by religion, overall cultural development and perhaps some racial prejudices.’⁴¹

Despite this acknowledgement, Navratilová attempts to exonerate Czechs by suggesting that such attitudes represent a wider suspicion of the ‘other’ on the part of a subaltern culture seeking to assert its identity, rather than reflecting a hostility specifically towards Muslims or the ‘Orient’. Yet this is to miss the point of the original critique of orientalism that Said articulated some 45 years also, namely, that orientalizing images were not some ‘additional’ layer of cultural representation, but were, rather,

intrinsic to how French, Britons and other Europeans conceived of themselves. In other words, Navratilová is herself potentially guilty of pleading for a kind of Czech colonial innocence. Indeed, given the extent of involvement of Czechs in the grand imperial projects of others, there is extensive evidence that the reverse was the case. A notable example of this is the work of Alphonse Mucha.

Mucha is celebrated as an enormously successful poster designer in Paris in the 1880s and 1890s and then, later, as the author of the *Slav Epic* (1908–1928), a vast cycle of 20 paintings depicting various episodes in Czech history as well as the legendary history of the earliest Slavic peoples.⁴² Yet of particular relevance here is the design he was commissioned to undertake by the Austria Government for the Pavilion for Bosnia-Herzegovina at the Paris World's Fair in 1900. Bosnia-Herzegovina had been administered by the Habsburg government since 1878, when it was detached from the Ottoman Empire. The pavilion was supposed to be an argument for the legitimacy of that arrangement (in 1908 it was formally annexed) and everything about the project suggested the paternalistic attitudes of a colonial regime. First, it is significant that no Bosnians were invited to submit a design; the pavilion building (Figure 6), consisting of a pastiche of various elements from vernacular 'Balkan' architecture, was by the almost forgotten Czech architect Karel Pánek. Mucha was responsible for the extensive interior murals that suggested the Bosnian identity was a combination of Slavic and Muslims elements brought together under beneficial Habsburg rule.⁴³ In other words, Mucha was drawn into a project of supporting a legitimizing narrative that saw Austria-Hungary as bringing the blessings of enlightened European civilization.



Figure 6. Karel Pánek, The Bosnia-Herzegovina Pavilion, Paris World's Fair (1900). Photo: Brown University Library.

Czechs in Sarajevo were thus as prone as Austrians or Hungarians to thinking of the Muslim inhabitants of Bosnia as exotic ‘orientals’, and the popularity of Alois Musil’s accounts of his travels in the Islamic Middle East is evidence of a substantial public appetite for exoticizing tales. This comparison is not fortuitous, for the Balkan peninsula grew into an object of fascination for many Czechs during the nineteenth century. Jaroslav Čermák (1830–1878), one of the most successful and popular painters of the mid-nineteenth century, who travelled widely around Bosnia, Croatia and Montenegro, established his reputation as a painter on the basis of the images he executed of the region, often paying particular attention to the political violence accompanying the bid for independence from Ottoman rule. Wounded warriors, captives and women being abducted by their brutal Ottoman enemies provided dramatic imagery to fuel public curiosity about this wild zone abutting the Islamic world, alongside picturesque ethnographic depictions such as his painting of a traditional wedding in Dalmatia (Figure 7).

We might consider the architectural designs by Pařík and Blážík in Bosnia in this light, too, for some of their more notable projects, such as the gymnasium in Mostar and the Sharia school in Sarajevo, exemplified a common characteristic of Habsburg-era civic architecture, namely, the adoption of a neo-Moorish style. The most famous example was the Sarajevo City Hall (1896, subsequently the National Library) (Figure 8) by Alexander Wittek and Ćiril Iveković. This and numerous other buildings erected across Bosnia have been the subject of study as instruments of Habsburg rule and of an official policy that sought to cultivate loyalty through the provision of an architecture that respected local traditions, and by fostering a local patriotism based on the idea of a local identity, *bošnjaštvo*, that countered rival Croatian and Serbian



Figure 7. Jaroslav Čermák, *Wedding in Dalmatia* (1875–1877). Photo: Google Art Project.



Figure 8. Alexander Wittek and Ćiril Iveković, The Sarajevo City Hall (now Bosnian National Library) after the 2013 reconstruction (1896–1901). Photo: Bernard Gagnon.

claims to the province.⁴⁴ This policy exhibits certain parallels with that of British rulers in India at the same time, where public buildings were designed in an ‘Indo-Saracenic’ style, a revivalist pastiche of various vernacular and historical ‘high’ architectural styles of the Indian sub-continent, and for broadly similar reasons.⁴⁵ What has been somewhat less examined is the fact that it was not always German-speaking Austrians or Hungarian who were the agents of this policy, but rather members of other groups, including the Czechs of Bohemia and Moravia.

Musil was not the only author of tales of ‘exotic’ places; travelogues and lectures on travels to distant places became an established literary genre from the late nineteenth century onwards. In the 1880s the Bohemian physician, cartographer and ethnographer Emil Holub (1847–1902), for example, was much in demand as a public lecturer and author, in which he would recount his experiences in southern Africa.⁴⁶ Holub was, alongside Musil, just the most successful of many figures, such as the botanist Alberto Frič (1882–1944) and the art collectors Václav Stejskal (1851–1934) and Enrique Stanko Vráz (1860–1932). Stejskal, for example, a native of north-eastern Bohemia, served in the Austrian imperial navy through the 1870s and 1880s and later worked in the Supreme Court of Accounts in Vienna. He took advantage of his voyages to the Asian Pacific during those decades to acquire a significant number of objects from China, Japan and other Asian countries.⁴⁷ Vráz, renowned for his global travels in the 1880s and 1890s to Africa, the Americas, China, Korea and Indonesia, lectured widely and wrote about his journeys, publishing collections of popular travel stories.⁴⁸

Whether as individual travellers, as architects working in the service of the state, as explorers or as participants in state-sponsored expeditions, these individuals were all beneficiaries of the wider European colonial system and, most importantly, took advantage of it, not least in the ability to travel around the globe. Moreover, as Vladimír Rozhoň has pointed out, almost none of them raised any voices against colonialism; the only criticism was that of Frič, who was more concerned with the *violence* of the implementation of colonial rule than with its legitimacy *per se*.⁴⁹ Holub, in contrast, was perhaps more representative of attitudes of the time when he expressed belief in the *necessity* of colonialism to the civilizational mission of Europeans.⁵⁰ He wrote extensively on the impact of the European presence in southern Africa, for example; it had led to wholesale slaughter, he acknowledged. Yet, still, colonial rule was a necessity. This much was clear from a paper he published in English in 1877 on ‘the native question.’ Here, he declaimed, ‘Is the savage more than a child? No! ... The savage is in fact not unlike the stage of childhood in a civilized state ... We find the native tribes in different stages of childish development ...’⁵¹ This was a notion he repeated on numerous occasions. His travelogue *Seven Years in Southern Africa*, published in Czech, German and English was even more emphatic:

The Hottentots, Griquas and Korannas may perhaps not inaptly be compared to children that allow themselves to be attracted by anything that amuses them, and clutch at whatever takes their fancy. For this reason alone, in spite of anything they may acquire of the mechanical arts of reading and writing, they must be unfit to be admitted as yet to the privileges of a civilized race. It seems to me indispensable that before they can be held entitled to the ordinary rights of citizenship they must be cultivated to receive correct views about labour, capital and wages ... and especially to recognise the moral principle that should guide their transactions alike amongst themselves and with the white men.⁵²

In one sense, much of this is already known and perhaps hardly unexpected, either, for Holub exemplifies a much wider phenomenon. A growing body of literature has examined these Bohemian and Czech encounters with ‘others’, whether cultures outside of Europe or that of neighbours deemed ‘backward’.⁵³ Even amongst Leftists the European colonial project was not always criticized; the Bohemian-Austrian socialist thinker and politician Karl Kautsky (1854–1938) rejected it, but others amongst the Social Democrats held to its beneficial impact.⁵⁴ The point here is not to single out individuals like Holub as, in some sense, culpable. Rather, it is, precisely, to highlight the fact that their views complied with attitudes that were widely held, even in putatively progressive circles, and to emphasize their place in the colonial *system*.

Recent research has brought to light examples of the persistence of colonial attitudes amongst the Prague social and political elite even after the creation of Czechoslovakia as a liberal democratic state in 1918. Despite the ambitions of Havlasa towards Togo, Czechoslovakia remained a landlocked central European state, but it ruled over peoples deemed to be on the ‘periphery’ of modern European civilization. For amongst the territories it acquired after the First World War was Sub-Carpathian

Ruthenia – previously part of Hungary – far to the east (it is now part of western Ukraine), which it ruled as a semi-colonial fiefdom. For Czechs it was a place of ‘former oriental chaos and disorder.’⁵⁵ One might expect that Hungarian inhabitants of the region, forcibly integrated into the new state, might be hostile to Czech ‘imperialism’, but Leftist Czech critics, too, complained in the 1930s about the colonial attitudes of the Prague authorities.⁵⁶ For as Marta Filipová has argued, the Czechoslovak state latter saw itself as having a civilizing mission, and treated the culture of the inhabitants of Ruthenia, especially the Rusyns, as exotic objects of an ethnographic gaze, in a stance comparable to the way that Habsburg administration had viewed itself in relation to Bosnia.⁵⁷ Indeed, Czechs often referred to their work ‘civilizing’ the region as teachers, administrators, engineers and urban designers as a kind of inner colonization.⁵⁸

Such examples suggest that, in contrast to the insistence on the *difference* between Habsburg and British/French imperialism, we can observe similarities when it comes to the field of cultural policy and practice. This affects, of course, how we view the participation of architects from Bohemia and Moravia in the wider culture of the Habsburg Empire and even after, in the Czechoslovak state. Yet where recognition of this phenomenon has led to a reassessment of the architectural culture of Britain, France and other major European states, this has had little impact on Czech architectural historiography.⁵⁹ The one monograph to have been published on Pařík, for example, celebrates his role in turning Sarajevo into a ‘European’ city, yet this is asserted with no critical analysis of the cultural-political dynamics embedded in such a claim.⁶⁰ Moreover, while it can be conceded that individuals such as Pařík were marginal presences in the Bohemian and Moravian architectural landscape, they form part of a larger body of representations and attitudes that show an affinity to those held elsewhere in the imperial powers of Europe, even if there were no Habsburg overseas colonies in the narrow sense of the term.

Collecting

One of the most prominent areas in which the question of decolonizing has been debated has been that of museum collecting and exhibiting, due to its place in the apparatus of European imperialism.⁶¹ No museums in the present-day Czech Republic have been an object of international interest comparable to that directed at, for example, the British Museum or the Humboldt Forum, but there are significant collections of Asian, African and native American artefacts in many museums, not only in Prague but also in regional towns. The Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures, now part of the National Museum, remains pre-eminent, but in Prague alone there are other institutions with notable collections of global artefacts, including the Department of Asian art in the National Gallery, as well as the extensive holdings of the Museum of Decorative Arts. In addition, the Moravian Industrial Museum (now part of the Moravian Gallery) in Brno as well as regional museums in, for example, Liberec, Opava, Plzeň and České Budějovice, all have notable collections of art from China, Japan, India and the Islamic world.

These were not amassed as a result of colonial conquest or appropriation, but they were nevertheless compiled within the system of European colonialism. Their impetus came from Vienna and, ultimately, Britain. The apparent success of the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum) in London in improving design quality prompted the Viennese art historian Rudolf Eitelberger to propose the creation of the Austrian Museum for Art and Industry in 1862, which became the template for nearly all subsequent museums of design in Austria-Hungary.⁶²

The programme of reform associated with the design museums was global in scope; right from the start, artefacts from India, Islamic cultures, China and Japan were collected because it was held that they had managed to reconcile the preservation of craft skills that had been lost in Europe (or indeed never known in the first place) with the demands for larger scale production.⁶³ It is often argued that museum displays were organized so as to convey an evolutionary view of human cultures in which artefacts from Asia, Africa and elsewhere represented earlier stages in civilizational development in contrast to Europe, which was understood, to use Donald Preziosi's memorable phrase, as the 'brain of the earth's body'.⁶⁴ However, the organizing principle of the early museums of design was that of *material*, and not of geographical/cultural, origin or historical evolution.⁶⁵ In Britain the displays of global art in the South Kensington museum also served as a prop for the intermeshed ideologies of free trade and empire, but in Austria-Hungary, the purpose was initially to serve a different agenda. For the interest in art as a global phenomenon was often deployed to support Habsburg cosmopolitanism and the message of unity in diversity, and it was cultivated as a counter-narrative to emerging ideologies of art as the expression of national identity on the part of various groups *within* the Habsburg Empire.

Such observations are important caveats when it comes to addressing the relation between museums, collecting and colonialism, since they highlight the fact that European institutions cannot be treated with a single broadbrush approach. This should not, however, diminish the extent to which the system of European colonialism framed much museum collecting and display in the Habsburg Empire. The core of the collection of Asian art of the Hungarian Museum of Applied Arts in Budapest, for example, was based on a body of artefacts purchased by János Xántus (1825–1894), whilst a member of the Austro-Hungarian East Asian Expedition of 1868, and these objects were originally intended for a future ethnographic museum.⁶⁶

A crucial event in this context was the Vienna World's Fair of 1873. Spectacle, consumption and the colonial order had been intrinsic to the logic of the fairs since the Great Exhibition of 1851, in which British India had occupied pride of place.⁶⁷ However, Vienna was the first such event in central Europe – including Germany – and it was also the first world fair where there was significant representation from Islamic and other Asian states, including Japan, China, Persia, Siam, the Ottoman Empire and Morocco. It was a watershed in the opening up of mass markets for 'exotic' goods, and was important for the development of museum collections in Austria-Hungary. The Fair also prompted the founding of the Museum of the Orient (initially, the Museum of Trade) in Vienna in 1875. Outside of Budapest and Vienna, the idea of setting up an industrial museum in Brno, in Moravia, had been motivated by the apparent success of the earlier World's Fairs, but it was the

Fair at Vienna that lay behind its creation in 1873, supported with a modest grant from the Emperor.⁶⁸

The design museums in Brno and Prague initially organized their collections by material and, from their earliest years, acquired objects from the Islamic world, Japan and China.⁶⁹ This high-minded plan is offset when we consider the context in which the objects were purchased. The Persian government, for example, had invested much energy, money and diplomatic capital into its representation at the Fair; its ruler Naser al-Din Shah was a modernizing figure who saw the event as an opportunity to advance Persian interests. Indeed, such was the importance he attached to it that he personally visited the Austrian capital, the first such visit by a Persian ruler.⁷⁰ Yet much as Persian art and craft was admired, the lack of industrial products confirmed orientalizing prejudices about Persian technological backwardness. The Fair was an important step in providing a 'critical impetus for exhibiting Islamic artworks in a manner that sensitively and thoughtfully attempted to consider their thematic, historical, and cultural relationships', but as one commentator has put it, the display nevertheless unwittingly provided fuel for stereotypes about European superiority.⁷¹

It was thanks to the Fair that significant numbers of Persian carpets and other artefacts first made their way into museum collections in the Habsburg Empire. Most of the objects acquired by the museums were not necessarily purchased at the Fair itself but from the various dealers and mediating agents.⁷² One of the most important was the firm of Philipp Haas in Vienna, which played an important role as a seller of 'oriental' carpets through the carpet factory it set up in Sarajevo in 1879. The Museum for Art and Industry in Vienna became a centre of trade in exotic goods through its close relation to Haas, and one might also suggest more generally that the development of the collections of Asian art in the museums of design, including those in Bohemia and Moravia, were equally enmeshed in this trade in global exotic goods.⁷³ Indeed, the reference to 'exotic' goods is pertinent here, since global art objects came to be recoded not as exemplary instances of skill and techniques but as cultural tokens and *ethnographic* artefacts. For if the 1873 World's Fair in Vienna was a crucial in terms of the display of 'exotic' cultures, it set in motion a process that intensified in subsequent such events. The Universal Exhibition of 1889 in Paris was a particularly important milestone in this context, for it provided a showcase of the ascendancy and intertwining of European imperialism and capitalism.⁷⁴ The 'Street of Cairo', for example consisted of an array of pavilions that presented an orientalizing microcosm of traditional Egyptian culture, its stark juxtaposition next to the Palace of Machines highlighting the difference between modern Europe and the seemingly backward Islamic world. If it was initially held that Islamic, Chinese and Japanese art were to be emulated for their technical skill, by 1889 this idea had disappeared.

Czech direct involvement in these world fairs was limited, but world fairs provided a crucial conduit where whereby artefacts from beyond Europe found their way into museum collections in Bohemia and Moravia, thereby providing increased exposure to the Czech public. In addition, other fairs organized by Czech-speakers conformed to a similar pattern of exoticizing displays of non-European cultures and artefacts. The 1895 Czechoslovak Ethnographic Exhibition held in Prague, for

example, intended as a celebration of Czech (and to a lesser extent, Slovak) culture, included an exhibition on native Americans (as part of the presentation on Czech emigration to North America), that included a wigwam amongst the exhibits, as well as a saloon bar in which one could be served by two African Americans for additional colour and ‘entertainment’.⁷⁵

Two key individuals in respect of collecting were Anna Fingerhutová (1788–1873), her son Vojtěch Náprstek (1826–1894) and his wife Josefa Náprstková (1838–1907), philanthropists and entrepreneurs, whose private museum is now the basis of the National Museum’s collections of Asian, African and American artefacts. They are much celebrated in the Czech Republic and in many respects were progressive figures; they were advocates of women’s rights, and Vojtěch was a Liberal forced into exile after the failure of the 1848 revolutions. A considerable number of studies have been published of their work.⁷⁶ Vojtěch played a key role in the pre-history of the industrial museums in Prague, having organized two highly successful exhibitions of design and applied arts in Prague in the early 1860s, but it is his role as a collector that merits consideration here. The Museum in Prague that bears the Náprstek name and which he opened in 1874 was initially based on the collection of objects Vojtěch had amassed during his exile abroad in the 1850s. It comprised industrial goods, applied arts, local crafts (‘the work of our mothers’) and ‘ethnographic collections from Africa, Asia, America and Australia’.⁷⁷

Most of this period was spent in the United States of America, first in New York for a few weeks and then, for nearly 10 years, in Milwaukee in Wisconsin. Milwaukee was expanding rapidly due to emigration from Germany, and Náprstek developed a number of successful businesses, including a bookshop and between 1852 and 1854 he published a newspaper, the *Milwaukee Flugblätter*, the first German-language newspaper in the United States.⁷⁸ Crucially, as one of the more westerly territories being occupied by Europeans, Wisconsin was also a contact zone with native Americans, specifically, the Lakota tribes. During his stay in Milwaukee Náprstek amassed a collection of some 130 ‘Indian curiosities,’ as he called them.⁷⁹ We do not know the exact circumstances under which they were acquired, and his correspondence from the period gives no clues, but Náprstek’s interest in the Lakota extended to learning their language. At the same time, his engagement with the Lakota came at a time of conflict due to the encroachment of European settlers on Lakota territory.⁸⁰ The Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851, signed between the government and a confederation of native peoples, had recognized the sovereignty of the latter over a vast swathe of territory in the Great Plains, but this had been largely ignored by European settlers, leading to intermittent conflict and massacres, such as the Grattan Massacre of 1855, in which a Lakota village had been wiped out by the US army, and culminating in the Dakota War of 1862 in neighbouring Minnesota.⁸¹ In 1856 Vojtěch Náprstek served as a member of an official US government mission to the Lakota tribe at a time of conflict, although the nature of his role it is not clear.⁸²

One should hesitate before jumping to conclusions about Vojtěch Náprstek’s personal role in this conflict, but nevertheless, his collection of Indian curiosities was amassed *in a context* of colonial conquest and domination, of which he was certainly *beneficiary* even if not an active participant. We can, moreover, take him as a

paradigmatic example of the position of Czechs more generally: not necessarily agents of an imperial power, but nevertheless, in their capacity as Austrian subjects and hence as Europeans, as beneficiaries of a social, cultural and political hierarchy. Indeed, the collections of the Náprsteks and their museum expanded from the 1880s onwards, thanks to donations from individuals such as the poet and novelist Julius Zeyer (1841–1901), Emil Holub, the chemist and ethnographer Pavel Durdík (1843–1903) and the travel writer Josef Kořenský (1847–1938), all of whom acquired the objects they donated in circumstances that bear similarity to the better known examples in France or Britain. Most of these individuals died before the creation of Czechoslovakia, but they laid down a template that was continued after 1918. Between the wars, the artist and illustrator Růžena Charlotta Urbanová (1905–1978) donated significant numbers of artefacts from Indonesia to the museum after travelling there extensively in the 1930s and 1940s, while Joe Hloucha (1881–1957), the nephew of Josef Kořenský, became an important collector of Japanese art from the turn of the century onwards, and his publications, exhibitions and donations made a significant contribution to generating public interest in Japanese art and culture.

A further individual to have become the topic of interest recently is the artist Vojtěch Chytil (1896–1936), who moved to China in 1921 and obtained a position teaching at the art academy in Beijing. He played a notable role as a cultural mediator between China and interwar Czechoslovakia. Not only was he held in high regard by his local students and other Chinese artists with whom he became acquainted, but he also staged a sequence of exhibitions of Japanese and Chinese art in the 1920s in Prague, Brno and other cities, as well as in Vienna.⁸³ We might distinguish Chytil from his contemporaries in that although exhibitions of Chinese and Japanese art were hardly rare, he was the only one to foreground work by living artists, specifically, those he lived and worked with in Beijing. In place of the common orientalizing fascination with historic *objets d'art* from China, he presented it as a site of continuing artistic production.

Hloucha, Zeyer, Holub and others have been the subject of considerable interest in recent years, and their travels and donations have been carefully documented.⁸⁴ There is no questioning their contribution to expanding the horizons of Czech culture. Nor indeed, is the sincerity of their enthusiasm in doubt. However, scholarship on their activities is notable for its mostly celebratory tone and lack of deeper analysis. One major project on interwar Czechoslovak 'oriental studies' explicitly *ruled out* a critical framing of the activities of individual scholars and explorers in terms of wider ideological and political dynamics and emphasized, instead, empirical biographical sketches.⁸⁵ This is not untypical of the approach of most studies on such figures.

A more critical eye might view individuals such as Chytil in a slightly different light. On the one hand he comes across as a sympathetic figure, promoting contemporary Chinese artists. Yet the particular artists whose work he exhibited – usually his students – were mostly committed to the retention of traditional media (i.e. ink drawing) subject matter and composition. He showed little interest in the various modernisms that were emerging in China in 1920s, such as the New Culture Movement in Shanghai, for example, which undertook a thorough questioning of inherited

cultural and artistic practices.⁸⁶ Thus, in being drawn to traditionalist kinds of contemporary art-making, Chytil was to some degree contributing to the maintenance of a certain stereotypes of Chinese art at a time when it was going through a process of rapid change.

We might compare him in this regard with his older British contemporary Ernest Havell (1861–1934). Havell was a tireless promoter of Indian art, a prolific author of works on the subject and was, from 1896 to 1905, director of the Government School of Art in Kolkata.⁸⁷ As director of the school, he encouraged his students to look to vernacular models rather than imitate European art, but this did not translate into a more generally critical stance towards British rule. Instead, he promoted a kind of supervised empowerment, in which he saw it as his role, as part of the civilizing mission of the British, to help Indians rediscover their own forgotten traditions. In other words, despite his enthusiasm for Indian culture, Havell's advocacy was a form of beneficent paternalism.⁸⁸ Mention of Havell in relation to Chytil is not arbitrary, for he was read approvingly in Czechoslovakia in the 1920s; his book *Ideals of Indian Art* was an important source for the Prague-based philosopher Emmanuel [Emanuel] Rádl's (1873–1942) book *East and West* on the relations between Europe and Asia.⁸⁹ Yet there are also limits to such a comparison. Chytil was certainly not a colonial administrator or a representative of colonial rule, even though he was a figure of cultural authority. Nevertheless, we can observe that the mere fact of his advocacy of Chinese art did not automatically translate into a dismantling of old hierarchies.

If we consider, too, how those other collectors mentioned accumulated their various collections, the engagement of many Czechs with cultures outside of Europe may also be viewed in a different light. One or two examples may be illustrative. Julius Zeyer visited Paris for the 1889 World's Fair and worked closely and in consultation with Josefa Náprstková when purchasing objects for the museum. The catalogue published by the National Museum lists over 1000 objects he donated to the museum. They range from Iranian rugs, jewellery, metalworks and ceramic tiles to Japanese dress accessories and Algerian costumes. The published correspondence would indicate that this was often under direct instruction from Náprstková.⁹⁰ Many were bought at the fair, while others were purchased at the Parisian department stores such as *Printemps* and *Le Bon Marché*, 'cathedrals of consumption', as one commentator has put it.⁹¹ These institutions sought to blur the boundaries between museum and shop space in the production of a phantasmagoria of the orient and exotic. Referring to the sale of Islamic rugs and porcelain, one promotional leaflet from 1893 by *Le Bon Marché*, for example, declared 'all artistic Paris gathered at the *Bon Marche* that day, and the store offered the sight of a vast oriental museum ... transporting the imagination to the sunny land of a thousand and one nights'.⁹²

Many of these transactions were, of course, entirely legitimate, and it would be misleading to view the trade in Asian, African and Islamic artefacts solely through the lens of colonialism, especially since this would rob many of the countries of origin of any agency when it came to commercial transactions with Europeans. Nevertheless, the fact that Zeyer purchased so many objects in the context of European colonialism means that the distinction between the 'colonial innocence' of Czechs

and the activities of collectors from other European states may be harder to draw than we may wish to admit; the difference may only have been one of degree. Indeed, even this judgement might come into question. The study of Emil Holub published by the National Museum states that amongst his ethnographic collection were approximately 100 rock carvings from southern Africa.⁹³ Given that many of these were carved on large immobile rocks, bringing them back to Prague would have involved partial destruction. Moreover, since these were often held to be sacred and mythological images, it is difficult to imagine that anything like meaningful consent would have been given by the local inhabitants.

Conclusion: Decolonizing the Present

In 1992 the Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano argued that:

It is necessary to extricate oneself from the linkages between rationality/modernity and coloniality ... epistemological decolonization, as decoloniality, is needed to clear the way for new intercultural communication, for an interchange of experiences and meanings, as the basis of another rationality that may legitimately pretend to some universality.⁹⁴

This is decolonizing at its most ambitious and also, perhaps, its most speculative. However, despite the significance of such aims, it is not necessary to engage with the project in such wide-ranging terms in order to begin decolonizing Czech art history. A basic starting point would be a critique of the entanglement of the art world of Bohemia and Moravia in the wider system of European colonialism in order to consider how its history may be rethought. This article suggests that even though there has been growing scholarly interest in this theme, the terms in which that entanglement has been thought require renewed critical scrutiny; at present, many studies have still tended to view them in terms of artistic 'influence' or 'inspiration'.⁹⁵ This applies not merely to the Habsburg period, which has been the main focus of this article, but to the twentieth century. For example, Tomáš Winter has convincingly demonstrated that the primitivist tropes familiar from European modernism were as present in Prague and Brno as they were in Paris or Berlin, first in a shorter study of the artist and collector Adolf Hoffmeister (1902–1973) and then in a larger scale study of primitivism, *Palms on the Vltava*.⁹⁶

The implications of this still need to be worked through, however, and a critical interrogation of Czech modernism comparable to that of primitivism elsewhere still needs to be undertaken.⁹⁷ In his account of the presumption of colonial exceptionalism on the part of many Czechs, Filip Herza stresses that decolonizing should not be seen merely as an attribution of colonial 'guilt' or as singling out individuals as meriting censure. Rather, it is concerned with broader examination of how the construction of Czech culture and identity has been (and remains) shaped by the legacy of this complex past, in order to then dismantle it. Czech and Czechoslovak art and culture have been the primary focus for this article, but this is not to suggest that they are uniquely problematic. Rather, it is the first step in opening the wider field of

central European art history, in order to attend to the specific ways in which it was and was not a participant in the larger European colonial project.

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Notes

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